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Homilies

*Auxiliary Bishop of Denver*

## **Homily: Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul**

Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, Denver, CO, January 25, 2009

Today the Church universal celebrates the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Every year this feast day is celebrated on the 25th of January, but this year the 25th of January falls on a Sunday and because we are in a special "Jubilee Year" celebrating the 2000th anniversary of the birth of St. Paul, we are allowed to celebrate the Mass of his conversion on a Sunday which in normal years, would be superseded by the regular Sunday Mass, in today's case it would be the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time. Only solemnities of Our Lord can supersede a Sunday mass. So this is, indeed, a special privilege for all of us. As we know, last year Pope Benedict XVI declared this year, from June 29, 2008 to June 29, 2009, a special jubilee year in honor of the birth of St. Paul. Historical records indicate that Saint Paul was born around the year 08.

Here in the Archdiocese of Denver, we have been offering special lectures, pilgrimages and various events to honor the great "Apostle to the Gentiles" and author of over 40% of the New Testament (13 letters) in all.

It is very fitting as well, that today also concludes the annual week of prayer for Christian Unity. St. Paul prayed, preached, and worked tirelessly for unity in the Church!

The Conversion of St. Paul which is recorded three times in the Acts of the Apostles: in Chapter 9 (which we heard in our first reading), in Chapter 22 and in Chapter 26, was a pivotal moment in the life of St. Paul. It was also an event that was well known in the early Church. St. Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, as I mentioned, records it 3 times in his account of the early years of the Church.

The event occurred on the road to Damascus, Syria, in the early 30's of the first century, at the very height of the time when Paul, as a zealous Jew and Pharisee, was persecuting the early Christians.

In fact, Paul had obtained letters from the High Priest of the temple in Jerusalem to enter the synagogues in Damascus, authorizing him to root out and identify any followers of Jesus who were in Damascus hanging around the synagogues, as the early Christians were wanting to do, that he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains and have them executed.

In fact, Luke tells us earlier in Chapter 8 of the Acts of the Apostles, that the persecution of the first Christians began with the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr, and Saul, as he was called in Hebrew, assisted in that murder.

So, St. Paul's conversion was a radical reversal and "turning point event" in his own life and in the life of the early Church. In his subsequent letters, Paul looks back on his conversion and uses it as a reference point in his life.

In his letter to the Philippians 3:7-8, he considers everything in his life up to that point, mere rubbish and worthless, compared to his new knowledge and friendship with Christ.

While he never describes in detail what happened to him on the road to Damascus, he leaves that to others like St. Luke to tell the story, it is clear that the story was well known among the early Christian community. He does, however, make reference to the event and his conversion many times in his letters. It makes sense that all the Christians would know the story, "that once he was a per-

secutor of Christians and now he had been transformed into a fervent apostle of Christ."

And even though Paul was an intellectual, a philosopher, and theologian, a learned Rabbi and Pharisee trained by the famous teacher Gamaliel, Paul's conversion was not an intellectual conversion. Paul did not convert because he reflected on the "ideas" of Christianity or the arguments for Christianity, but rather Paul converted because of a direct encounter with the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ himself.

Even without speaking in detail of his conversion, St. Paul refers on several occasions to this most important event in his life, that, as Pope Benedict XVI points out "he too is a witness of the Resurrection of Jesus, the revelation of which he received directly from Jesus, together with his apostolic mission" (from Wednesday Audience on September 3, 2008).

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul describes how Jesus died on the cross, was buried, and rose on the third day and appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the 12 and then to the 500 brethren most of whom were still alive in Paul's time, then to James and "last of all he appeared also to me!" Thus he makes it clear that this event, this conversion experience is the foundation of his apostolic mission and his new life. Like the Gospel today, Paul receives his mission to go out and preach and teach.

There are also other texts where he looks back on his conversion: "Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship (Romans 1: 4-5).

And then in 1 Corinthians 9:1, he asks: "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?"

And lastly, the most widely known text is from his letter to the Galatians, "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grave, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were Apostles before me, but I went away to Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus." (Gal 1:15-17)

Our Holy Father points out that this "self-apology" is a clear indication that Paul is a true witness of the Risen Christ, that he has received his own mission directly from the Risen One.

I sometimes refer to my own conversion to the Catholic Church during my college years as an "intellectual conversion." Like many converts, I read my way into the Catholic Church and, as a "fallen away Presbyterian" I firmly believe in those famous words of John Henry Cardinal Newman, the great 19th century convert to Catholicism and leader of the Oxford Movement, whose motto I chose for my own Episcopal motto, "to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant."

Yet, at the same time, my conversion to Catholicism was not merely an intellectual exercise or logical progression.

I remember when I was taking instruction class, like many of the candidates and catechumens whom I will call forth in just a few moments who are preparing to be received into the Catholic Church at Easter here at the Cathedral, there were others in my class who understood the Catholic arguments and the Catholic claim much better than I did, and yet did not convert.

To show how God works in mysterious ways, the whole reason for me taking instructions was a favor to my roommate to take his girlfriend, who was a born again evangelical who was a very smart girl and knew her bible well, to the classes because she refused to go with him.

About halfway through the course of instruction (about this time in the RCIA) when the priest asked us to make a commitment, I signed up and Diane did not. I remember going home that day all excited and told my roommates and my own roommate asked me about Diane and I told him that she did not sign up, he got all upset. I said aren't you happy I'm becoming a Catholic and he said yes, but it wasn't supposed to happen like this, she was the one who was supposed to convert!

She eventually converted about 4 years later and is a fervent Catholic. In fact, I ran into her in Sydney, Australia during World Youth Day this past August. She has since moved to California and was leading a big youth group to World Youth Day.

All conversion is a personal encounter with the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Yes, intellectual recognition and assent to a creed and to the doctrine of faith is absolutely essential, otherwise it is nothing more

than religious emotion and enthusiasm - a "religious high", if you will, which will fade away and dissipate over time. But again, as Newman writes in another place, "No one ever died for a proposition, but thousands have shed their blood for a person, Jesus Christ."

And St. Paul was among those glorious ranks of martyrs who shed their blood for Jesus Christ.

St. Paul is perhaps the greatest theologian, apologist, and intellectual defender of the one true faith, and yet, it was his personal encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus that changed his heart and transformed him from an enemy of Christians to one of its most staunch defenders.

Let me conclude with the beautiful words of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in explaining what the conversion of St. Paul means to us as Christians today. Pope Benedict writes:

"Turning now to ourselves, let us ask what this means for us. It means that for us too Christianity is not a new philosophy or a new morality. We are only Christians if we encounter Christ. Of course, he does not show himself to us in this overwhelming, luminous way, as he did to Paul to make him the Apostle to all peoples. But we too can encounter Christ in reading Sacred Scripture, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch Christ's Heart and feel him touching ours. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we truly become Christians. And in this way our reason opens, all Christ's wisdom opens, as do all the riches of truth.

Therefore let us pray the Lord to illumine us, to grant us an encounter with his presence in our world, and thus to grant us a lively faith, an open heart and great love for all, which is capable of renewing the world." (Wednesday Audience, September 3, 2008)